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PUBLICATIONS OF THE  
of Jewish Literary Societies.

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I.

HINTS ON THE FORMATION OF  
LITERARY SOCIETIES.

BY

BERTRAM JACOBS, LL.B.

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*PAPER READ AT THE CONFERENCE OF JEWISH  
LITERARY SOCIETIES, JUNE 29, 1902.*

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LONDON: 1902.

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PUBLICATIONS OF THE  
Union of Jewish Literary Societies.

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## HINTS ON THE FORMATION OF LITERARY SOCIETIES

A GOOD lady once said: "I ought to know something about the bringing up of children; I've buried seven." Of the literary societies with whose inception I have been in any way connected some are defunct and several others ought so to be. One or two, however, flourish with a vigour which has exceeded the most sanguine expectations of their founders, and which should put to shame those critics who predict for every such institution an early and inglorious demise. From the diversity of my experiences I collect the few hints which I venture to submit to you.

The one who has conceived the idea of founding a literary society will usually follow the practice made use of by the ancients before embarking on any important enterprise. He will consult the omens and inquire whether the conditions are favourable to his venture. There can be no harm in this course, provided that he follows the antique example to the full and interprets the omens according to his desires. The truth is that the would-be founder of a literary society need not fear failure under practically any circumstances, however forbidding these may at first sight appear, provided that he is gifted with a sufficiency of energy and tact. The smallness of the community matters not; it may safely be laid down that if a community is large enough to maintain a synagogue it is large enough to maintain a literary society. Again, he must not be discouraged by the apparent lack of any literary feeling among the proposed

members, by their taste for unelevated recreations, by their attitude of self-satisfied contempt towards any suggestion for their intellectual uplifting. The very existence of these faults proves up to the hilt the need of a literary society in that community. Nevertheless much discretion is called for in dealing with such cases. If one preaches a crusade, one offends and repels the very people whom it is most desirable to bring under the refining influences of a literary society. Many such a society has been still-born through the absence of tact in the early stages of its incubation. One must go to work insinuatingly, coaxingly, and, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, lure the communal infants (for they are nothing else) to the destruction of their grosser selves.

Having resolved upon your project, what should be the earliest practical move towards its realisation? One's first impulse, I believe, is to convene a public meeting. I am convinced that such a course is unadvisable at this stage. The methods more particularly associated with the greatest of showmen and which crystallise around the inspiring legend, "Barnum is coming," are out of place in the early embryonic period of a literary society. The preliminary step is to associate with yourself a band of choice spirits—just a half-dozen or so of those most likely to be of active service in the formation, and, later, in the conduct of the society. Let them be young—not necessarily in point of age, but in spirit; possessed of enthusiasm and ideals, or at least the possibility of acquiring them. To these communicate your idea—in strict confidence. This will at once enlist their sympathy. Constitute yourselves a provisional committee. Appoint as your temporary honorary secretary one of those ladies or gentlemen whom a kindly Providence always sends to us at such

junctures, and without whose assistance I firmly believe that mankind would be unable to carry on the universal scheme and the world would come to a sudden standstill. Develop your plans secretly, darkly, conspirator-like. This will beget the curiosity of those not in the plot, and do more than anything else could do to arouse the interest of the community in the project.

The work of the provisional committee may be divided into three separate tasks. These are (*a*) to lay down the general lines upon which the society shall run; (*b*) to draft rules for its government; and (*c*) to arrange who shall act as its first set of officers. A word on each of these matters. (*a*) With regard to the general lines of the society, one broad question is likely to agitate the minds of the provisional committee. It is as to whether the society is to be purely literary or whether it shall comprise a social side as well. Now there can be no doubt that a society combining social as well as literary interests presents greater attractiveness to most persons than one which presents a literary side alone. And there seems no good reason why a social element should not be included, so long as this does not swamp the primary one for which the society was called into existence. But, of course, this is just the danger, and I must admit that it is a very real one, although not insurmountable. And if the social side of a society does become uppermost, it is certain that not only will the literary side eventually be eliminated, but the society will not exist for long even as a purely social institution. It may develop cliques, it may lose popularity through counter-attractions, an undesirable personal element may find its way into it, and the result in any case will be its complete break up. My advice in this matter is to move warily. Call your society a literary



one simply, and include only literary and kindred matters among its statement of objects. This will not preclude you from giving an occasional dance, concert, or conversation. Drop a hint that these things may be, but make no rash promises. If you should eventually decide to hold any of these functions you will then do so as a matter of grace, not of compulsion, and they will derive special dignity and importance from the fact that they will be given by a society which purports to be purely intellectual in its aims.

(b) Concerning the drafting of the rules of the society I need say very little, as in Appendix A to this paper there will be found a set of rules which are intended as a model. To one point only I wish to call attention. It is suggested that the Annual General Meeting be held in April: that is to say, at the conclusion of the winter instead of, as is usually done, at the commencement of it. This arrangement possesses the advantage that it gives the newly elected executive the summer during which to prepare for the winter session. Experience has shown that a literary programme cannot be compiled on the spur of the moment. Lecturers, especially those best worth hearing, must be approached and their promises obtained a good while in advance; papers take, in many cases, a long time to prepare, and other portions of the syllabus, such as joint debates, are frequently matters of lengthy negotiation. There is the further advantage in the arrangement suggested, that it makes the same persons responsible for both the preparation and the carrying out of the programme.

(c) The third matter with which the provisional committee will have to deal is that of the first executive of the society. Although in subsequent years the election will rest with the general body of members, the choice of the first set of officers will practically



be vested in the provisional committee. It is perhaps as well that this be the case, because upon the decision arrived at will depend a great question of principle affecting possibly the whole future of the society. The question is this: "Are you going in for workers or figureheads? Are you to confer your honours upon men who have already so many that they regard them with indifference? Will you make impossible demands for further work from those who have already more to do than they can properly perform?" I admit that it is usual to do these things. Nevertheless I cannot condemn the practice too strongly. In my humble opinion those members of the society who have shown the deepest interest in it, who have laboured for its welfare unstintingly and ungrudgingly, are the ones, no matter what their social position or financial resources may be, whom the society should delight to honour by the conferment upon them of its highest offices. The respect and dignity which are the outcome of self-dependence will prove of more value to the society in the long run than the platonic patronage of the most eminent or wealthy outsider. To attempt to build a society upon the basis of a "show" president is to endeavour to balance a cone upon its apex. I am aware that I have been giving utterance to communal heresy, but nevertheless the course which I advocate has been followed in at any rate one literary society within my experience, and the splendid position which that society occupies to-day among similar institutions is, to a great extent, directly traceable to this source.

The provisional committee having matured its scheme, its concluding work will be to submit such scheme to a public meeting. A circular letter couched in the most seductive language should be drawn up and sent to every person who may possibly become a member of the proposed

society, inviting him to attend. And it is at this stage that it is permissible to bang the big drum. A certain amount of judicious booming will now do no harm. Invoke the assistance of the press, which is ever ready to aid in such an object as the one you have in hand, and use every means consonant with the self-respect and dignity of the proposed society (which must never be lost sight of), for the purpose of securing a large and enthusiastic gathering, and consequently a lengthy membership roll with which to start the society on its way. In order that nothing may be omitted on that important occasion, I have given in Appendix B of this paper a model of an agenda for such a meeting.

The meeting over, the society will be in existence, and my hints might properly be here brought to a close. There are, however, a couple of matters which will come almost at once under the consideration of the committee (not the provisional one this time) of such importance, and so closely connected with the formative process of the society, that I cannot forbear from touching upon them. The first of these is as to the place of meeting of the society during its session. You may have the Synagogue schoolroom or vestry-room placed at your disposal, or you may have to seek accommodation elsewhere. But what I desire to warn you against is using a room much too large for the attendance. Most lecturers are satisfied with a small audience, but they like a crowded one. They have an aversion to empty benches, and prefer an audience of twenty squeezed into a room intended to hold fifteen, to an audience of a hundred sprinkled over a hall large enough to accommodate five times that number. The other point relates to the nature of the programme to be set before the members. As a paper on this subject is at the present moment

being read or discussed under this very roof, I need not expatiate on this topic. I wish only to suggest in this place that the programme be as varied as possible, and that the Jewish interest be permitted to preponderate. One of the most important advantages of a Jewish Literary Society is the opportunity which it offers for the discussion of Jewish affairs. Above all, do not be afraid of placing communal topics among the subjects of debate. Of course if you do so, more especially if you discuss them in a candid and fearless spirit, you will probably invoke the wrath of the powers that be, and possibly even some very high ecclesiastical dignitary may fulminate at you from the pulpit. But this need not deter you. Light has too great a curative influence upon the body politic to be neglected as a remedy for communal distemper.

I trust that these hints, or some of them, may be found useful not only in the formation but in the reformation or revivification of some literary societies. Where followed out conscientiously, with of course such modifications as special circumstances require, they ought, I think, to result in the establishment of a society which can play a useful part among similar institutions. It may or may not attain a leading rôle, but it should at least have no difficulty in cutting a respectable figure in the chorus.

## APPENDIX A

## MODEL RULES

1. The Society shall be called the.....  
Jewish Literary Society.

2. The objects of the Society shall be :—(a) The cultivation of a knowledge of Jewish history and literature ; (b) The free discussion of topics—political, communal, or religious—relating to Jewry in this and other countries ; (c) The provision of opportunities for literary and social intercourse by means of lectures, debates, or otherwise.

3. The election of members shall be subject to the following regulations :—(a) The candidate for membership must be nominated by two members of the Society, at least one of whom shall be a member of the Executive Committee ; (b) The candidate shall be at least.....years of age ; (c) The name of the candidate shall be placed before the Executive Committee, with whom the election shall rest, but the candidate shall not be elected if one-third of those present vote against the election ; (d) The election of a candidate shall not take place unless the names of the candidate and his nominators shall have been placed on the notice convening the meeting of the Executive Committee at which the election of the candidate is proposed ; (e) Before any candidate is elected, he and his nominators shall sign an application in the form hereto annexed.

4. The subscription to the Society shall be.....  
per annum, payable from the 1st of April or October. The subscription of any member joining between these dates shall be reckoned as from the earlier date. A new member shall not be entitled to any of the privileges of membership until he or she shall have paid his or her subscription.

5. The Society shall be managed by an Executive



Committee consisting of the President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and Secretary of the Society, and.....other members. The quorum for a meeting of the Executive Committee shall be..... The election of the Executive Committee shall take place at the Annual General Meeting, and the voting shall be by ballot. The outgoing Executive Committee shall prepare a report of its work and a balance-sheet duly audited, and present same to the Annual General Meeting. The Executive Committee may act notwithstanding any vacancy, and it may fill up any vacancy occurring between two elections except in the office of President.

6. Two auditors shall be appointed for the purpose of auditing the balance-sheet and examining the accounts. The auditors shall be elected at the Annual General Meeting.

7. The Annual General Meeting of the Society shall be held in the month of April. The quorum shall be.....

8. The Executive Committee may, whenever it shall deem it desirable, and the President shall upon a requisition signed by at least.....members, call a Special General Meeting. The quorum at such a meeting shall be.....

9. A member three months in arrear with his or her subscription, or any other sum due to the Society, shall cease to be a member, provided that due notice shall have been given to him or her that such subscription or other sum is overdue. The Executive Committee may waive this rule wherever it shall deem fit.

10. A member may be expelled from the Society by a vote of three-fourths of those present at a meeting of the Executive Committee convened especially for that purpose.

11. The Executive Committee may make bye-laws not inconsistent with these rules, and it may delegate any portion of its powers to sub-committees which need not be composed entirely of members of the Executive Committee.

## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FORM

I declare that I am in sympathy with the objects of the.....Jewish Literary Society, and I desire to become a member.

*Signature*.....

*Address*.....

We have the pleasure to nominate.....  
as a member of the.....Jewish  
Literary Society, knowing him to be in sympathy with the  
objects of the Society.

*Signatures* { .....  
.....

## APPENDIX B

MODEL OF AGENDA FOR THE MEETING CONVENED  
TO ESTABLISH THE SOCIETY

1. Resolution proposed by .....“ That  
the formation of a Jewish Literary Society in this town is  
desirable, and that the same be and is hereby established.”

2. Consideration of the annexed draft rules.

3. Election of President, Vice-President, Treasurer,  
Secretary, and.....other members of the Executive  
Committee.

4. Election of auditors.

5. Resolution proposed by.....“ That  
this Society join the Union of Jewish Literary Societies,  
the appointment of representatives at the Conference of  
the Union to be left in the hands of the Executive Com-  
mittee.”

## APPENDIX C

## RULES FOR DEBATE

1. The speech of the opener in a debate and the speech of the opposer in a debate shall not be longer than twenty minutes.

2. Every other speech shall not be longer than ten minutes.

3. No member shall read his speech.

4. No member shall be permitted to speak a second time in the same debate, except at the instance of the Chairman, and by the permission of the meeting. At the conclusion of the debate the opposer shall reply, then the opener shall reply. Finally the Chairman shall sum up.

5. None but members of the Society shall be permitted to vote.

6. Visitors shall be allowed to speak in the debate at the invitation of the Chairman.









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